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Putting kids before adults

District administrators lament loss of adult education courses, but say children's learning takes the higher priority.

By Tom Ragan

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By the fall, the Adult Education Program, which is just blocks from the Department of Motor Vehicles on Meyer Place in Costa Mesa, will be a shadow of its bustling self.

The English as a second language classrooms now filled by hundreds of adult students — many of them immigrants, many of them limited in their English — will be empty.

The computers will have long been removed.

The staff of 40 teachers will either be unemployed or reassigned in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District.

The only class left will be the high school diploma lab, where a pair of teachers will help students catch up on lost credits so they can graduate. Aside from that, the incessant sort of learning that has become synonymous with the district's Adult Education Program will cease.

The program's elimination is part of the \$12 million in cuts that the school district needs to make in order to balance its 2010-11 budget, which has been short-changed by declining property tax revenues and state funding.

Newport-Mesa Unified, whose adult program has existed since 1937, isn't the only district that's abolishing programs that seek to give adult students a second chance.

Nearly 50 school districts statewide are in the midst of axing adult education for the next four years and redirecting state money into the K-12 classrooms.

Pick a letter between A and Z, and somewhere in between there will be a unified school district in a certain city that's eliminating its adult education and pouring the money back into the district to boost the pot of sagging general revenues, which have seen better days due to the state's cutbacks to the tune of billions of dollars.

Anaheim Unified is doing it. So is Irvine, Tustin and Fullerton.

Schwarzenegger's decision to sign the legislation is a day that lives in infamy for those who have worked for years to educate adults.

Not only do the impending cuts at Newport-Mesa's adult education program have some 5,000 students worried and scrambling for alternative classes across Orange County, but it also has left the adult program's administrator, Martha Rankin, disheartened.

"It's sad," said Rankin, lead administrator for the last six years. "Our adult education program has been a model for the state. In the last two years alone, we've been asked to make presentations at dozens of statewide and national conferences."

But even more troubling, Rankin said, is that many of the students will now have to forgo an education if they don't find a free alternative, something that can't be good for a society.



Adult Education teacher Taylor Blakely teaches a student how to use certain aspects of Google in a popular class called "Learning Through Technology." All ESL classes and classes such as this one will be eliminated by next year to help balance the Newport Mesa Unified School District's 2010-11 budget.

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"Our core mission is to serve adults," she said. "And we've done this well by teaching them about 21st century skills. Not every adult education program has done what we've done. We're in the forefront because we integrate technology into daily instruction, and they learn how to think and evaluate and problem-solve."

Maria Carranza, 74, is one of those students. Originally from Lima, Peru, she lives in Costa Mesa with her daughter, a hard-working nurse who supports them.

For two semesters, Carranza has been learning a bit of English and dabbling in Google searches and the like in the Learning English through Technology class.

To Carranza, learning English is helping her find more friends and, as she put it, "communicate with society."

"Now I'm not sure what I'll do," Carranza said, sitting at a computer.

Taylor Blakely, her instructor, doesn't know what he's going to do, either. He's been an adult education teacher for nine years, teaching up to six hours a day.

"What we're really doing is messing up future generations of education for children because we're shutting down the parents," he said. "Studies have shown that when the parents are better educated, so are the children."

But as much as there is a downside to the cuts, there's also an upside: The district can redirect the \$848,000 from the Adult Education Program to K-8 programs.

"People have to remember that adult education is not a requirement, it's a luxury," said Laura Boss, district spokeswoman. "We have been extremely lucky to have had it all these years."

But unfortunately, Boss added, now is the time to make the hard choices.

"It's the sad reality that we are living in right now," Boss said. "There are no good choices to make when you consider the human costs associated with reducing budgets. Not only to staff but those you serve. So, you have to look at your priorities as an organization. In this particular case, K-12 students are the priority, not adults."

Boss said that the district hopes to explore options through grants and other possible funding sources to continue to offer educational opportunities for adults in the community.

"However, maintaining the commitment to adult education right now is not feasible given the current fiscal climate," she added.

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